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Citation:

Thomson, S (2015) Building a conversational framework for e-learning to support the future implementation of learning technologies. In: Smart Learning – teaching and learning with smartphones and tablets in post compulsory education. MELSIG & Sheffield Hallam University, 86 - 90 (298). ISBN 1843873834, 978-1843873839

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Document Version:

Book Section (Accepted Version)

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Building a conversational framework for e-learning to support the future implementation of learning technologies

Simon Thomson

Let's start this piece with a quote which aligns with my thinking and was a catalyst for some of the ideas I am about to pour out below.

Transformation is more about the human and organizational aspects of teaching and learning than it is about the use of technology – Laurillard (2007, p. xvi)

This is fundamental in positioning our approach to technology in learning and teaching, yet it is often lost in the big strategic rollout of technologies and the “minimum expectations” documents which subsequently follow.

To start with we need to think a bit differently about what we currently do with technology enhanced learning activity. I am suggesting that we begin by stopping some current practices that we may have:

STOP insisting that everyone who teaches uses technology

Teaching has been around much longer than technology, and learning has successfully taken place without technology so why do we often insist that “everyone” must use technology as part of their teaching?

I can think of many excellent teaching (and learning) experiences I have had where technology was not involved.

STOP creating hoops for people to jump through

If your institution has a “minimum expectations” document, for the VLE or equivalent, then within that will likely be a series of requirements (hoops).

The intention of these documents is supposedly good - it's to make everyone use the technology (see previous paragraph). However in reality it's not a measure of quality - it's a measure of compliance.

STOP running workshops run by TEL champions.

This may seem a bit harsh because TEL champions and Learning Technologists are doing a fantastic job, but the reality is that academic colleagues expect them to be good. What is more effective is when people who have made the move from lacking digital confidence to achieving increased digital ability show what *they* have done. The best evangelists are the converted congregation, not the preacher.

Smart decisions

Therefore when planning to use smart devices in learning & teaching we should refrain from any of the three activities I identified above. Instead the focus of activity should be on the conversation, not on the device(s).

Using smart devices in an effective way means making smart decisions and that does not include insisting on their use, creating hoops or running all workshops where the experts demonstrate the potential.

So before you think about buying your smart devices, start by talking about the “why”. Using the 4E Framework (see <http://4e.digis.im>) is one way in which you might wish to approach those conversations. The basis of the framework is to establish a rationale and ownership model where it is needed. The conversations should be framed around four core questions:

1. What can smart devices **enable** us to do (that we couldn't do without them)?
2. How can smart devices **enhance** what we already do (e.g. voting system in a lecture)?

3. How can smart devices **enrich** our learning experiences (such as add a global dimension to the learning)?
4. How can smart devices **empower** learners and teachers (giving them choices, such as different locations to teach & learn)?

Through these conversations we should seek to establish a clear rationale for using smart devices, but also identify clear potential positive impact. The framework is not hierarchical, there is no requirement for everyone to be empowered and the conversations are best undertaken with mixed staff and student groups.

This process can help to alleviate some of the fears associated with technology change or technology implementation. I had long recognised the physiological barriers associated with “change” specifically pertaining to technology related change. I was particularly drawn to the adapted work of Kubler-Ross and the 5 Stages of Grief model (2005).

I began to explore the 5 Stages to aspects of my own work in supporting colleagues to use technology in learning and teaching to enhance the student (and staff) experience. In using the model I mapped the 5 Stages against the typical journey I saw staff undertaking with regards to Technology Enhanced Learning (TEL).

5 Stages of Grief (with TEL comments in brackets)

1. **Denial** - This isn't happening to me. (Oh no not something else to learn).
2. **Anger** - Who's to blame for this? Why me? (Who made the decision to get this?)
3. **Bargaining** - If I can live till my daughter's wedding (Why can't we just stick with.....)
4. **Depression** - I am too sad to do anything. (I'm too busy to even think about it.)
5. **Acceptance** - I'm at peace with what is coming. (Actually it looks ok, might give it a go.)

I particularly like this (figure 1.) expanded version based on the Kübler-Ross model which brings in terms such as "resistance" and "self-doubt" which are particular emotions I have witnessed (and personally experienced) when approaching new technologies.

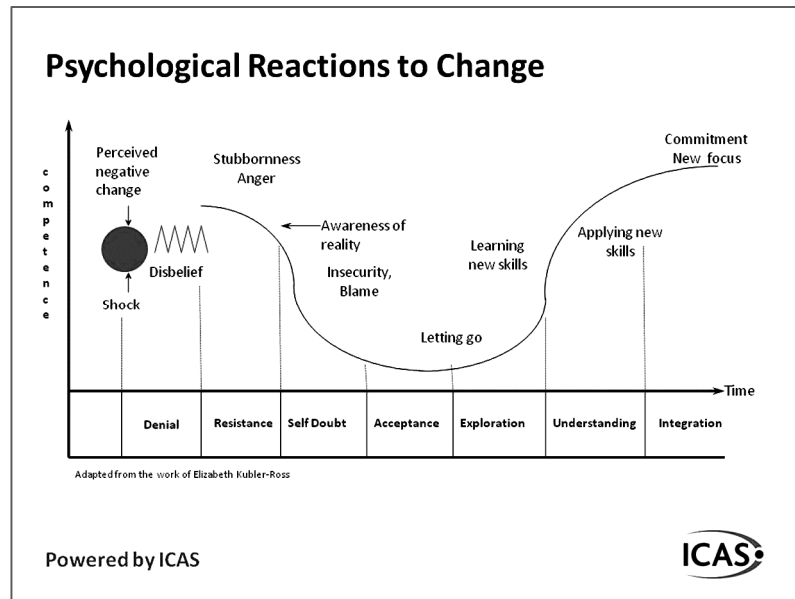


Figure 1. **Image Source:** <http://agilesutra.wordpress.com/2011/11/09/willpower-to-change-is-an-exhaustive-resource/> (with original © accredited to <http://www.icas.co.za/>)

Conclusion

The value of smart device use in learning and teaching is now being explored more widely, partly through publications such as this, but also in the wider context of mobile device use. However, there are also studies (e.g. Kuznekoff & Titsworth, 2013) and reports which highlight the potential pitfalls associated with such devices if we do not have effective conversations around their purpose and value.

It is the conversations (or lack of) prior to the implementation of smart device initiatives that will see them succeed or fail, not the technology.

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It appears in:

Middleton, A., ed. (2015). *Smart learning: Teaching and learning with smartphones and tablets in post compulsory education*. Media-Enhanced Learning Special Interest Group and Sheffield Hallam University.

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